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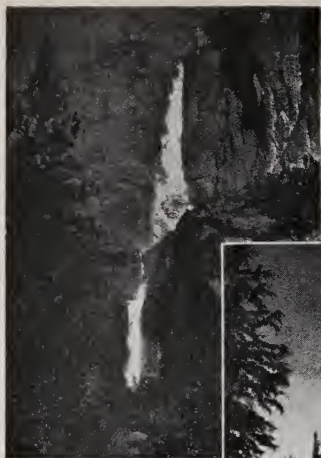
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VOLUME XXXVI - NUMBER 4

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YOSEMITE FALLS, MIRROR EFFECT

—Peabody, c. 1880



Yosemite Nature Notes

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THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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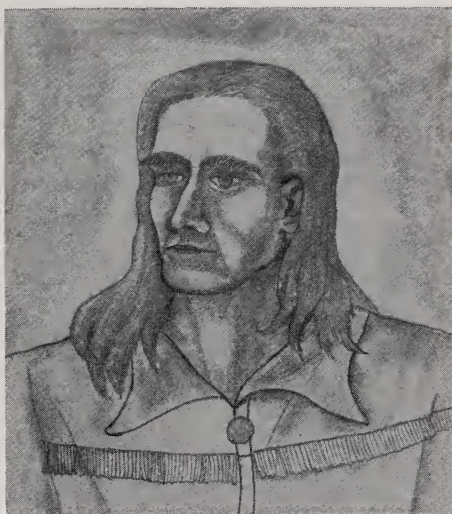
NO. 4

THE DISCOVERERS OF YOSEMITE

By Neil R. Bassett, Ranger-Naturalist

to those interested in Yosemite the early story of the valley is well known. They know how the historic Indian tribes were decimated by war and disease, how they dispersed, and generations later were gathered together by Chief Yaya to be brought to the valley of the Ahwahnee. They were present, then, when Captain Joseph Redford Walker, in October 1833, led an expedition across the Sierra route to the Pacific. His route was probably along the ridge separating the Merced and Tuolumne valleys, and members of his party may have looked down into Yosemite Valley. Interest in the valley at that time must have been negligible, however.

Another record of discovery, and one which is regarded as the effective discovery, is that of the coming of Major James D. Savage's California Battalion in March 1851. Entering the valley near Inspiration Point, they were in pursuit of Indians which had but a short time before been decimated and plundered his property in the Merced and that of other settlers in the Southern Mines area. In the absence of material to the contrary, Savage and his men appear to have been the first non-Indians to



James D. Savage

set foot on the valley floor.

Less well known is the appearance of the diary of William Penn Abrams about ten years ago. There is every reason to believe in its authenticity and it reveals that in October 1849, two years before Savage's explorations, Abrams and his friend U. N. Reamer accidentally saw the valley from the south rim, probably from near Inspiration Point above the present Wawona Tunnel. He says in part (transcribed as originally written):

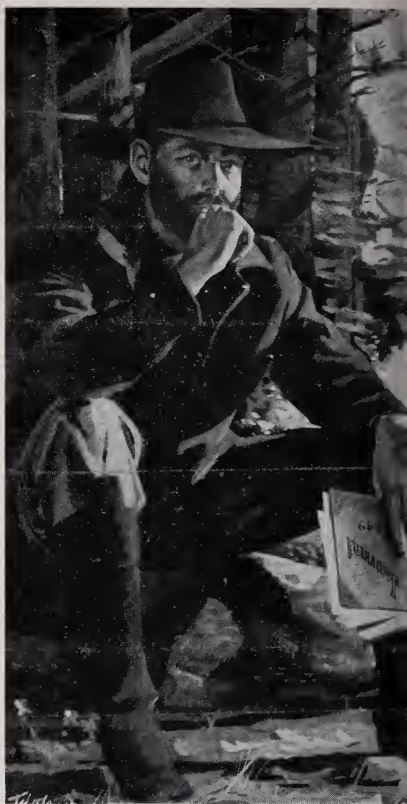
"Oct. 18th. Returned to S.F. after visit

to Savage property on Merced River. Prospects none too good for a mill. Savage is a blasphemous fellow who has five squaws for wives for which he takes his authority from the Scriptures. While at Savage's, Reamer and I saw grizzly tracks and went out to hunt him down getting lost in the mountains and not returning until the following evening, found our way to camp over an Indian trail that lead past a valley enclosed by stupendous cliffs rising perhaps 3000 feet from their base and which gave us cause for wonder. Not far off a waterfall dropped from a cliff below three jagged peaks into the valley while farther beyond a rounded mountain stood, the valley side of which looked as though it had been sliced with a knife as one would slice a loaf of bread and which Reamer and I called the Rock of Ages."

There seems to be no doubt that Abrams described Bridalveil Fall, Cathedral Rocks and Half Dome. The actual discovery date is obscure since no entries were made from October 7 to 17. Evidently he did not descend to the valley floor.

Born in Sanborton, New Hampshire in 1820, William Penn Abrams began his diary in 1839 at the age of 19, but only five volumes have survived the years. Most of the pages are in ink, although some are in pencil traced over with ink, indicating that perhaps ink may not always have been available. The page with the Yosemite Valley description was not traced over but is in the same handwriting as the inked pages and penciled notations throughout.

Abrams retained the family occupation by becoming a millwright. He was employed in that capacity for about 10 years, beginning in 1839, in Gainsville, Alabama, with time



William P. Abrams

out for a trip to Cuba and another back to New Hampshire to be married. When news of Marshall's discovery of gold reached him in Alabama, he and Reamer traveled to California via the Isthmus of Panama and by boat to San Francisco arriving August 14, 1849. The trip lasted 3 months and 3 days, and entailed the Isthmus on foot and canoe. From San Francisco they went to Stockton and thence to Stanislaus River gold operations. Being in an unprofitable region, millwrights their stay was brief and they returned to Stockton to work carpentering until sent up the Merced River to investigate mill sites. On this trip the two friends made their discovery of Yosemite Valley.

It is not impossible that others saw the valley before him and after Walker's trip through the area, nor is it difficult to imagine that some of the thousands of miners and traders from the Southern Mines observed these "stupendous cliffs." If so, it is unfortunate that they did not record their travels. It is hoped that further study can be made of the Abnaws' data and reported further in the *Nature Notes*.



AN INDIAN THANKSGIVING

By Estella Falla

For days we noted the annual influx of Paiutes coming to Yosemite. This was in September of 1911, as I recall. They were coming "over the mountain" — that is, from the Nevada side of the Sierra, around Mono Lake, then over the steep climb of the Tioga Pass to Lake Tenaya, then down a steep, short, secret trail which came out at Mirror Lake, the west gate of the Yosemite. These Indians came in groups of two or more families, all walking, except that now and then a small child was given a ride on the back of a burro or pony already laden with sacks of pine nuts. It was an annual ceremony. A few ponies and burros and many of the Indian women carried pine nuts to be traded for acorns which were profuse in Yosemite.

In previous years, as soon as they arrived in Yosemite, the women came to Salter's General Store to sell their baskets. As bookkeeper for the store and because I had more patience than the men clerks, I did the buying — one basket at a time,

each one paid for in silver dollars as purchased. But this year, the baskets were not brought in immediately on arrival. The camp on the Indian Creek grew daily from the usual forty to fifty Indians, and we noted members of other sections coming in over the Wawona, El Portal, and Big Oak Flat Roads until the camp grew to about 300.

Nightly, the usual "hand game" was played — a dozen or more Indians of both sexes sitting cross-legged on the ground on either side of a low-burning bonfire playing a form of our "Up! Jenkins", blankets



spread across their laps to take the place of tables. These games would last until two or three o'clock in the morning. As a player became tired, he lay down where he was, his feet toward the fire and took a short nap, then rejoined the game.

After closing hours, about eleven at night, we often went to the camp to watch the gambling. We could throw in a quarter or half dollar if we liked on the blanket on what we guessed might be the winning side. As the gamesters lost, one by one they rushed to the store to sell their baskets.

The Indian camp with its u-ma-chas made of bark in the style of a tepee, its tents and its chuck-ahs, always held a fascination for me. The chuck-ahs especially interested me as I had watched Teleucie Tellez and her sister make one. Then gentle Lucy was an especially good friend and the best basket maker among the Paiutes, with Emma Murphy a close second.

Four strong saplings were firmly planted in the ground in the form of a four-foot square to start the chuck-ahs. These were kept bare for more than 4 feet above the ground, the being then the usual snow level line. Heavy cord was woven around the posts above the snow line in such a way that a thick wall of pine needles sharp points down, was woven through up a distance of about 4 feet. A suitable base was built in the chuck-ah, the bottom bristling with pine needles pointing downward. In this container were stored the acorns and other nuts to be used as food, safe from the marauding squirrels. The top was finished off with bark to shed the rain. In the case of small chuck-ah, an inverted washtub served as a roof.

One thing that had always puzzled me at the camp was a barbed wire fence that fenced in nothing. It was near the Indian Creek, about 300 feet long, its four strands of barbed wire held up by tree limbs used as fence posts.



Typical dwelling or u-ma-cha used in the Yosemite area.

One day Old Mary, whose picture hangs in many of the Yosemite camps, written at the time, happily and secretly sought me out when I was alone in the office. The camp was full of Indians and I supposed I was happy over the grand reunion.

He bent over me as I sat and whispered, "Tomorrow, make an acorn meal. You come".

"Where, Mary?"

"By the river near Nick's camp. Other people. You see. Plenty Indian there. See O'clock."

Of course, I promised to come. The five or four women clerks in the office thought it would be a fine idea to go along, too, and I had a hard time making them understand that they had not been invited. If they wished to join the party, I would not go.

All the way to the river, I kept a lookout to see I was not followed.

Old Mary was looking for me when I arrived. She came to me and led me to a large, comfortable stone where I was to sit, facing the fire which was burning about 20 feet in front of me. To my left, sitting on the ground in a group, were 300 Indians and their well-behaved, quiet children. To my right ran the Merced River. It startled me. I had been on the seat of honor where I could see everything. And I sat alone where everyone could see me.

I had wanted to bring pencil, pad, and camera to take notes and pictures but knew I must just sit and watch and say nothing. It did not occur to me to ask permission to take pictures.

As the fire burned, three rounded stones about 6 or 7 inches in diameter were laid on it to heat. I noticed that the river sand piles had been laid in a row, then bordered with small stones. It seems to me that the water, where the fire burned, was

bordered in a square about two feet in diameter. While to the right and left as I faced them, the piles were bordered in the form of a circle, each about two feet in diameter, and all very symmetrical and artistic in appearance. In the circle to the right of the fire as I faced it, imbedded in the leveled sand which was about four inches deep, was a large Indian basket about 18 inches in diameter at the top and about six inches at the base and about 18 inches in height. It was a very beautiful, very old basket of Paiute make.

The sand in the circle to the left had also been leveled to about four inches, and on this sand was piled several inches of acorn meal.

The ceremony began.

An Indian woman carried a basket of water jug to the river and filled it, returning to the cooking basket into which the man in attendance poured the water. Another Indian woman had already brought a water jug full of water to the Indian man squatting by the circle of meal, and he gently poured the water over the meal to leach it. The Indian man at the fire kept it at the low flame.

When the meal was properly leached of its bitter taste, the Indian who had been by the cooking basket, took a fair-sized basket and filled it with the damp meal, then poured it into the cooking basket, stirring it with a stick. The Indian at the fire then took two short, stout tree limbs about 1½" in diameter, each with an upward growing branch cut off to make a hook. With these wooden tongs, he lifted a hot stone from the fire, placed it in the cooking basket, and I could see steam begin to rise.

The man at the meal circle continued to leach, an Indian woman keeping him supplied with river water.



Acorns were stored in the chuck-ah's.

Then, the man at the fire used his tongs to lift the cooled stone from the cooking basket and replaced it with a hot one. By the time the third stone was dropped in, the mixture in the basket was boiling. I could see it bubbling from my seat. I was so excited, it was hard for me to keep a calm exterior. I wanted to run down close to see the boiling at close range. I was also too excited to time the cooking, but soon three Indian women, each carrying what we called a Klamath Squaw cap, a very flexible basket about seven or eight

inches in diameter and almost inches tall, came to the cooking basket. When the mixture was done the Indian man at the cooking basket picked up a small basket which used as a measure and poured the mixture into each squaw cap. The Indian woman squeezed two edges of her cap together and hurried to a rock ledge in a bend of the river of the current, and turned the tents of her cap over the flat rock to be cooled by the gently flowing water which washed over it. The glutinous loaves held their shape and

ut eight inches long and three
es in diameter. As the loaves
e laid on the rock, the squaw
s were rinsed in the river, and
women hurried back to the cook-
basket for other loaves. When the
king basket was empty, the pro-
s was repeated over and over.
er water was again put in the
ket, then meal, then a hot rock.
this distant time I do not recall
y many hot rocks were required
ook each batch of bread. But I
recall my disappointment at the
discordant note. As the bread
led on the stone, the loaves were
tly laid in new galvanized wash
s. Even in 1911, there were no
e baskets in which to pack them.
was almost sundown when the
was over. No one had spoken a
rd. I wondered about the mean-
of the circles and the squares. I
ed no questions. The Indians had
bably lost the answers I wanted.
When the cooking was over and
tubs filled, Mary brought a loaf
me, wrapped in a newspaper.
h tub of bread was carried by
o Indian women, and since we
re in the rear, we were the last to
Mary was happy.

You like?"

Very much."

Ve said little as we left the river
ether to reach the road leading
he village. When we came to the
d, we turned left a short distance
ore we came to the Indian Creek.
en we came to the creek, Mary
ned right as she said "Good-bye!"
ad hoped to be asked to the feast
ich would follow, for looking up
Creek I could see to what use the
zzling barbed wire fence was put.
elieve there was a dressed wild
reon on every barb. Wild pigeons
ne to Yosemite by the thousands
ch year. The Indians must have
ared them, for certainly no one
d heard a shot. At the store we all

tasted the unsalted, glutinous bread,
not bad.

That night at eight the big pow-
wow was held. It started with the
principal men of the tribes, about 20
men, sitting in a circle around the
low burning bonfire. A larger circle
of the rest of the men sat outside the
inner circle and then the Indian
women stood or sat at the back. The
tourists stood at the front.

It began with a speech by the Chief
of the Yosemite. As he spoke, I
thought that any speech student
could have taken lessons from his
eloquence. Quietly, the modulations
of his voice, his rhetoric pauses, his
few eloquent gestures, conveyed his
meaning to us, although we did not
understand his language, and we
even got the drift of his humor. For
an hour he held white and Indian
alike during his speech.

The circles broke up and the danc-
ing began — the deer hunting dance,
the courting dance where young
people made known their prefer-
ences in husbands and wives, and
many other dances. The next day
the trek reversed itself, going back
"over the mountain" to the deserts
of Nevada, over the Wowona, El
Portal, and Big Oak Flat Roads to
the deserts and plains of California.

Quiet settled down for the fall and
winter with Saler's Store at one end,
the Sentinel Hotel at the other end
of the block-long village on one side
of the street, and facing Salter's,
Degnan's home, and bakery at one
end and the Cedar Cottage, so called
because of the cedar tree which grew
through one of its rooms, at the other
with picture studios, the post office,
dance pavilion, Wells Fargo Ex-
press, Yosemite Valley Transporta-
tion Co., and a meat market filling
in the spaces between.

This old village lives only in the
memories of the old-timers for pro-
gress has swept it away. There are

no more acorn bread rites, no more pow-wows.

But in the year 1911, when we settled down to the everyday routine following the pow-wow, I thought of the immense amount of work this reunion had entailed. All summer I had watched Old Mary and the children race the squirrels in gathering the acorns from the ground. At the campground I had seen Old Lucy (not the basket maker) carried to a blanket spread in the sun on the ground where all day she hulled acorns with her teeth. She was 108 years old, but she had all her front teeth, at least, although they were worn to half their length. Later I had seen the younger women grind dry acorns to a meal at the Indian Rock whose surface was covered with holes made by centuries of Indians using long stones as pestles, the huge stone resembling a beehive of mortars where a dozen women could work at a time.

Looking back, I have been very

grateful to my Indian friends who vited me to witness the rite of thanksgiving for the harvest, the making the acorn bread, perhaps the first held in California. The Indians have since been moved about a mile where those working for the government live in houses supplied with electric lamps, refrigerators and sometimes with washing machines. I know they must miss the music of the Indian Creek, as it gurgles rushing way to the Merced.

In 1952, I went to Yosemite and looked up Teleucie. When she answered my knock, she did not recognize me.

"This is Estella," I said, "remember? A long time ago."

"Oh, Estella!", she said and her arms around me, laying cheek to mine. Then she took my face in her hands, and I could no longer see her sight had failed. Then, disappointedly, "Oh, so old!" Recovering herself, she laughed and added "too!" We had both been rather young women when last we had parted.

EDITOR'S NOTE—Estella Falls has supplied this interesting and human story of the Indians of the Yosemite area from her observations during a period when the Miwok Indian culture still existed. She was born in 1875 in Tres Pinos, San Bonito County, California. Her father was British, born on the island of Guernsey. Her mother was born in Mexico City, of a Mexican mother and a Spanish father who was the son of a representative of Spain at the court of Emperor Maximilian. When Maximilian was executed (1867), the women of the family fled from Mexico to San Francisco, where Estella's parents met.

Estella studied to be a teacher starting at San Jose Normal but contracted tuberculosis and later obtained her teacher's certificate in Los Angeles County. Because of tuberculosis she could not teach and held many jobs through her working years. In 1909 she spent a month camped in Yosemite and the following year returned to work as bookkeeper and Assistant Postmaster at Salter's Store from 1910 to 1914. These she described as the happiest years of her life. She was fascinated with the Indians, stage drivers, woodchoppers and visitors who came into the area.

Because of her winning personality she was extremely popular wherever she went and won the confidence of the Indians. Being observant and keenly interested in her surroundings she was able to record her experiences.

Today Miss Falls lives in an Eastern Star Home in Los Angeles. Despite her 81 years she is still possessed with a keen memory. She has drawn from her diary this interesting page in her

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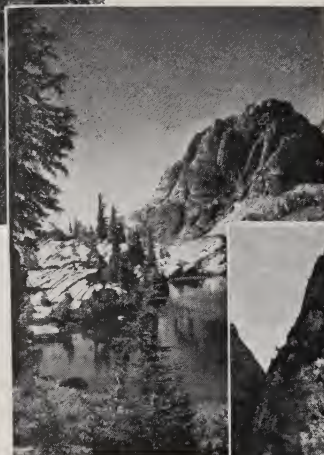
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